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THE UNION LEAGUE CLUB

OF

NEW YORK.

TRIBUTE

TO THE MEMORY OF

HENRY WILSON,

LATE VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

DECEMBER 9th, 1875.

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BY

ELLIOT C. COWDIN.

CLUB HOUSE, MADISON AVENUE,
COR. EAST TWENTY-SIXTH STREET.

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TRIBUTE

TO THE MEMORY OF

HENRY WILSON,

LATE VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

At the monthly meeting of the Union League Club of New-York, held December 9th, 1875, the President, Joseph H. Choate, Esq., in the chair, after a few fitting remarks in reference to the death of Vice-President Wilson, called upon Mr. Cowdin, an old and intimate friend of the deceased, to address the Club on the life and character of the departed statesman. Mr. Cowdin spoke as follows:

Mr. President and Gentlemen:

I am not insensible of the delicate and honorable duty that has been assigned me, of expressing in your name the profound sorrow with which we received the announcement of the decease of the Hon. Henry Wilson, Vice-President of the United States.

It is peculiarly fitting that the Union League Club of New-York, founded in the spirit of "Unconditional Loyalty," should place on record its appreciation of his eminent public services—of his life-long de-

votion to the liberties of the people and the Union of the States. You will, nevertheless, not expect me to enter into a detail of so important and useful a career—interwoven, as it is, with some of the most thrilling events in the history of our country for more than a quarter of a century.

In many aspects HENRY WILSON will stand before posterity as one of the most remarkable men of his times. Cradled in obscurity and poverty, and struggling till he reached mature manhood against the most depressing circumstances, he nevertheless advanced by steady steps to positions of exalted trusts, and finally reached the second place in the gift of the American people. It is rare, very-rare, that we see a citizen rising so high from a station originally so low, and making so enduring a mark upon the institutions of his country, despite the blighting influence that surrounded his early years.

I need not trace even the outlines of his career. The eulogiums from the press, the platform and the pulpit since his death have made them as familiar as household words. Inured to toil from childhood, he was a farm apprentice till he reached his majority, when he learned the trade of a shoemaker, and finally settled in Natick, in the State of Massachusetts, in 1838, at the age of twenty-seven. With the most meagre education he, nevertheless, early acquired a valuable stock of knowledge by studying hundreds of books, in part by the

light of pine knots in long winter evenings, and thus became a self-taught and well-read young man.

In the famous HARRISON-VAN BUREN campaign of 1840 he won reputation in Massachusetts as a successful Whig speaker. His rise was then rapid. He was repeatedly elected to each branch of the Legislature, and was a member of the Convention for revising the Constitution of Massachusetts. With characteristic energy he bore an active share in the business of those several bodies. The WILMOT Proviso having been practically ignored by the Whig party, he withdrew from its ranks and became one of the leading spirits in assembling the Buffalo Free Soil Convention in 1848, which, through the influence of EX-Attorney-General BENJAMIN F. BUTLER, SALMON P. CHASE, SANFORD E. CHURCH and SAMUEL J. TILDEN, nominated MARTIN VAN BUREN for President, and CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS for Vice-President. He was equally efficient in organizing the famous coalition of 1851 between the Democrats, the Free Soil Whigs and the Abolitionists, which resulted in making GEORGE S. BOUTWELL, a Democrat, Governor; CALEB CUSHING, a Democrat, Judge of the Supreme Court; NATHANIEL P. BANKS, a Democrat, Speaker of the House of Representatives; Mr. WILSON, himself a Free Soil Whig, President of the Senate; and more than all, CHARLES SUMNER, an Abolitionist, Senator in Congress. It need hardly be added, that these five men subsequently became eminent in public affairs.

In 1855, Mr. WILSON was chosen the successor of EDWARD EVERETT in the Senate of the United States. He was now in the vigor of manhood, with powers ripened by experience in politics and enlarged by acquisitions in knowledge. During the fifteen years since he first came into public notice in Massachusetts, he had been remarkably successful. To what was this mainly due? HENRY WILSON was a man of the people. In these fifteen years he had probably addressed one-fourth of the adult population of the State; and the rest knew him by reputation. While his eye was fixed aloft, his heart was with the laboring classes from whence he had sprung. It was this that made him the uncompromising enemy of slavery. "My sympathies," said he, on one occasion, "are with the toiling millions all over the globe."

He was pre-eminently a man of action. His zealous spirit would not allow him to be idle. His energy bore down all obstacles. His industry was marvellous. Indeed, he was as restless as the wind, but never fitful or aimless.

He visited Europe in the summer of 1871, not spending his time chiefly in studying works of art and examining the curiosities of the Old World, but in inquiring into the condition of the struggling poor, and contrasting it with the condition of the laboring class in his native land. On his return he bore enthusiastic testimony to the fact, that the ardent aspiration of the great mass of

European laborers was to accumulate money enough to emigrate to the United States in order to improve their condition in life.

He was, doubtless, ambitious. It was not, however, a vulgar desire to hold office and enjoy its emoluments, but an aspiration for place and power that he might benefit the people and be useful to the Commonwealth. To instincts thus keen, aspirations thus noble, and industry thus indefatigable, he added quick perceptions, a tenacious memory, and high moral courage. It was these qualities, coupled with unflinching devotion to the cause of emancipation, which, in those stormy years, had taken fast hold of the heart of Massachusetts, that carried Mr. WILSON by rapid steps from a shoemaker's bench at Natick up to the chair in the National Capital previously filled by ADAMS, OTIS, WEBSTER, CHOATE and EVERETT.

A large field now opened before the quick and observant eye of WILSON. On entering the Senate he took his seat by the side of the scholarly, cultivated, brilliant SUMNER. Though holding views in close accord on the great questions then convulsing the country, two men could hardly have stood more widely apart in respect to birth, family, training, education, their tastes and habits, the social circle wherein they moved, their modes of handling in the forum the important subjects which agitated the nation, and which were soon to plunge it into a terrible civil war. To the honor of both these remark-

able men, it can be said, that each had unbounded confidence in the sagacity, the integrity, the unwavering fidelity to the cause of freedom of the other, and that during the eighteen years they represented Massachusetts together, each left his colleague to pursue his own course without distrust, envy or molestation.

When Mr. WILSON entered the Senate it contained a great amount of talent. Among the disciples of CALHOUN, and who afterward went into the Rebellion, there were TOOMBS, SLIDELL, HUNTER, BUTLER, MASON and BENJAMIN. The Democrats who tried to travel in the ancient paths were CASS and DOUGLASS. A few still called themselves Whigs, the most conspicuous of whom were CRITTENDEN, BELL and CLAYTON. Of those in accord with Mr. WILSON it might suffice to name SEWARD, WADE, SUMNER, FESSENDEN and TRUMBULL. Here was an array of talent and experience that would have appalled a man of less heroic nerve than WILSON.

Not accustomed in any body whereof he was a member to drop into the list of the inconsiderables, and in the Senate thrown into the shade by the shining gifts of his colleague, nevertheless WILSON'S courage and energy impelled him to move rapidly towards the advanced line of the leaders ; and he soon began to take a prominent part in the business and debates of the Senate.

The six years of his service previous to the commencement of the Civil War was one of the decisive periods in American history. It was the epoch of the

repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the delivery of the DRED SCOTT decision, the attempt to force Slavery upon Kansas at the point of bayonets, the effort to coerce President BUCHANAN into a compliance with all the demands of the Slavery propagandists and kindred measures, preparatory to carrying the South out of the Union.

In the private councils of his own party, and in the public discussions in the Senate, and in speeches before the people, Mr. WILSON bore his full share. But he encountered peculiar trials personal to himself. He had only got accustomed to his seat, when his colleague was stricken down by the bludgeon of BROOKS. The course of Mr. WILSON on this occasion will never be forgotten. In the Senate, the next morning after the assault, he pronounced the act "brutal, murderous and cowardly." For this bold utterance, BROOKS challenged him to fight a duel. WILSON immediately sent him the following reply:

"I characterized on the floor of the Senate the assault upon my colleague as 'brutal, murderous and cowardly.' I thought so then. I think so now. I have no qualification whatever to make in regard to those words. I have never entertained, in the Senate or elsewhere, the idea of personal responsibility in the sense of the duellist. I have always regarded duelling as the relic of a barbarous civilization, which the law of the country has branded as

a crime. I religiously believe in the right of self-defence in its broadest sense. The law of my country and the matured conviction of my whole life alike forbid me to meet you for the purpose indicated in your letter."

Having sent this answer, Mr. WILSON telegraphed to his wife, then at Natick:

"Have declined to fight a duel. Shall do my duty and leave the result with God. If assailed, shall defend my life, if possible, at any cost. Be calm."

It was noised all about Washington the next day, that an attack was to be made upon him by armed men. Writing hurriedly to friends in Massachusetts to provide for his son, then only ten years of age, in the event of his assassination, Mr. WILSON, arming himself for defence, resolved to go straight onward where his accustomed duties called him; and he did so.

Many years afterwards an interesting fact was related to him by ex-Speaker ORR, of South Carolina, then just appointed Minister to Russia by President GRANT. He stated, that on the evening after WILSON'S reply to BROOKS, a body of Southerners met to consider the proposition of a concerted attack upon WILSON of such a character as would effectually put an end to his career. The hot bloods among the conspirators were clamorous for vengeance. But through the strenuous exertions of Mr. ORR, the scheme was finally abandoned.

By his course on this occasion Mr. Wilson struck a blow at the system of duelling from which it has never recovered; and since that time no duel has been fought between public men at the National Capital. The barbarous code was virtually repealed by the courageous hand of Henry Wilson.

It would be superfluous to trace the career of Mr. Wilson in the Senate. Down to the Rebellion he was on the Military Committee, of which Jefferson Davis was then Chairman. Though occupying political positions as wide apart as the poles, such were their kind personal relations, that when Davis resigned from the Senate to go into the Rebellion, he walked across the Chamber, and taking Mr. Wilson by the hand, cordially said, "Wilson, you and I have always been friends; I hope we shall meet in calmer times."

After the secession of the Southern Senators, Mr. Wilson became Chairman of the Military Committee, and held that important post all through the Civil War, and, indeed, until he left the chair he had held consecutively as a Senator for eighteen eventful years, to take his seat as Vice-President. Suffice it to say, that as Chairman of this Committee, it devolved largely upon him to shape and carry through the Senate those gigantic measures for the raising, equipment and marshalling of the immense armies we placed in the field. In the discharge of these high duties he had the confidence of the

President, the War Department and the Commanders of the forces.

Secretary CAMERON, just before his retirement from the War Department to accept the Mission to Russia, addressed a letter to Senator WILSON, in which he said :

"No man, in my opinion, in the whole country, has done more to aid the War Department in preparing the mighty army now under arms, than yourself ; and before leaving this city, I think it my duty to offer to you my sincere thanks as its late head."

General SCOTT was equally emphatic in his praise. Referring to Senator WILSON'S extraordinary labors at the extra session of Congress in 1861, that veteran soldier said : "He had done more work in that short session than all the Chairmen of the Military Committee had done for the last twenty years."

It would be a work of supererogation to trace the career of Mr. WILSON since the close of the war ; for it is a familiar part of our national history.

Unextinguishable devotion to his Anti-Slavery convictions was the most marked trait in his political career. It was his guiding star, leading him into, out of, and through parties.

It may be said to his honor, that he was never ashamed of his lowly origin ; nor that he was compelled to toil

for his daily bread. In the session of 1858, Senator HAMMOND, of South Carolina, while vindicating the system of slavery, stigmatized the laboring men of the North as "the mudsills of society," and "essentially slaves." Among others who replied to him, was Senator WILSON, who said:

"Sir, I am the son of a hireling manual laborer, who, with the frost of seventy winters on his brow, 'lives by daily labor.' I, too, have 'lived by daily labor.' I, too, have been 'a hireling manual laborer.' Poverty cast its dark and chilling shadow over the home of my childhood, and want was sometimes there—an unbidden guest. At the age of ten years—to aid him who gave me being in keeping the gaunt spectre from the hearth of the mother that bore me—I left the home of my boyhood, and went forth to earn my bread by daily labor."

Not less honorable than this is the fact, that in these venal times, when many seize the opportunities of office to acquire wealth, Mr. WILSON, who held office thirty years, was always poor; and perhaps I may be pardoned if I here state, that he remarked to me a few weeks before his death that he would gladly sell all his property for eight thousand dollars. Many of you, gentlemen, now present, will remember the remarks of Mr. WILSON at the dinner given to Mr. CHITTENDEN in this hall by merchants of New-York in March last, when he said:

"To be a public man in our country means years of toil, sore trials and poverty. A public man should be independently rich or independently poor."

With a robust frame and unaffected manners, his virtues were of the sturdiest kind. He was the very soul of frankness, and despised chicanery, duplicity and all crooked ways. Truth was at home upon his lips; in a word, he gave force and significance to that familiar line,

"An *honest* man *is* the *noblest* work of God."

With a strong sense of right he never resorted to expedients and compromises to advance his personal interests or attain great public ends. Though he possessed few of the minor graces of polished society, he was hearty, genial and kindly, and had a soul susceptible to the tenderest emotions. A little incident will illustrate this latter trait.

During the past season Mr. WILSON was twice my guest at my summer home at Mount Kisco. On one of these occasions a child's birth-day party occurred, and as the little folks skipped merrily about the lawn, his feelings were touched by the scene, and he observed to a gentleman standing near him: "I know of no joy in life greater than to be the father of a nice family of children," and his voice quivered as he spoke.

That Mr. WILSON was alive to every tender affection of domestic life is shown by the little volume he had al-

ways with him, pasted in the fly leaves of which were photographs of his departed wife and deceased soldier boy—the last of his family.

With such a large and generous heart, it was natural that he should be forgiving in the hour of his country's triumph; and, therefore, like his co-workers in the anti-slavery struggle—GERRIT SMITH, HORACE GREELY and CHARLES SUMNER—his feelings softened towards those who had been engaged in the Rebellion as soon as they laid down their arms and the rights of the enslaved were made secure by the Constitution. Even as early as the summer of 1862, he said in the Senate:

"After the conflict, when the din of battle has ceased, the humane, and kindly, and charitable feelings of the country and of the world will require us to deal gently with the masses of the people who were engaged in the Rebellion."

The death of Vice-President WILSON has created a void in the public service which it will be difficult to fill. There have been abler statesmen, more eminent leaders; but there has been scarcely one who was so thoroughly a man of the people, who led so useful a life, and who rose to stations so high and commanding, from a level so humble and obscure.

The life of such a man is a wonderful encouragement to the rising generation, and especially to the poor young men of the country. It is a bright example, addressing

itself to them with peculiar force, bidding them to bear up against adverse fortunes, to aim high in their career, whatever it may be, and by every honorable means to press forward courageously, without faltering or deviation.

In conclusion, Mr. COWDIN submitted the following

RESOLUTIONS.

Resolved, That the Union League Club of New-York heard with profound emotion of the death of the Honorable HENRY WILSON, Vice-President of the United States.

Mr. WILSON was one of the remarkable men of the country, in an era distinguished for extraordinary men. Born in obscurity, reared in poverty, and cut off from obtaining, through ordinary channels, more than the merest rudiments of education, he, nevertheless, was able by self-culture, early to obtain much useful knowledge.

Possessed of valuable gifts as a public speaker, and taking a deep interest in political affairs, breathing the warmest devotion to the cause of human freedom, he rapidly rose to positions of distinction in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with which his career was closely identified for a third of a century. Transferred from a seat in each branch of its Legislature to the chair of a Senator in Congress, just at the opening of one of the most eventful epochs in the history of the Republic, he there bore a leading part in that policy which resulted in the successful termination of our civil war, in the preservation of the union of the States, and in the final overthrow of negro slavery.

Resolved, That the marked traits in the life and career of one who rose so high from a level so low, and ultimately achieved so much in spite of the adverse influences of his youth, were energy, industry, firmness, absolute honesty, high moral courage, practical good sense, enthusiastic devotion to the interests of the common people, uncompromising hostility to the institution of slavery, and an unfaltering patriotism in the hour of his country's trials.

Though entertaining strong political convictions, he was always a manly and courteous opponent, and in his own party, as well as in the country at large, after the war was over, he was the tireless advocate of conciliation and peace.

In the career of such a man, we have the ripe fruits of those popular principles planted by our fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution.

Resolved, That these resolutions be entered on the records of the Club, and a copy, duly authenticated, sent to the friends of the deceased.

The resolutions were seconded by Judge CHARLES A. PEABODY, in a few appropriate remarks, and unanimously adopted.

On motion of Mr. DANIEL F. APPLETON, it was voted that the Eulogy and Resolutions be printed.

JOSEPH H. CHOATE,
President.

GEORGE H. B. HILL,
Secretary.

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